

REASON SEVEN

By Jenie Skoy

Utah's Moving Billboard The State's Film Industry



ONE OF THE BIGGEST STARS in Hollywood is the face of Utah. Moviegoers have seen it in many films. Producers make commercials under Delicate Arch and shoot action films about speed-breaking cars racing over the Bonneville Salt Flats. Sci-fi flicks don't quite have the proper feel unless they are set against one of the state's other-worldly landscapes, such as the Martian-like Goblin Valley. You may have watched Thelma and Louise drive off a cliff called Fossil Point in Southern Utah's desert; or Tom Cruise hanging precariously off another cliff in Dead Horse Point in the opening scene of "Mission Impossible 2."

More than 600 films and TV movies have been made in Utah, from "Stagecoach," made in the 1920s, to more recent films like "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "Dumb and Dumber." Utah has also been a backdrop for various television series including "Touched By An Angel" and the more recent "Everwood." But besides choosing Utah because of the state's unique landscape, many filmmakers come here because of the state's historic commitment to the art of film.

SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

Perhaps the best known catalyst in Utah's film industry is the Sundance Film Festival. This annual affair has branded Utah as one of the most sophisticated and progressive film venues in the world. The Festival, which will celebrate its 25-year anniversary next year, was started in 1981 by Robert Redford as a means of supporting independent artists who didn't have access to the venues or resources to make and market independent films. According to Sundance.org, "under [Redford's] leadership Sundance continues to invigorate American cinema and theatre by providing an inspiring and supportive setting for creative dialogue among emerging and experienced artists."

But there is much more to Sundance than the Sundance Film Festival; the Sundance Institute, the festival's parent group, offers workshops and men-

toring for emerging and established screenwriters and directors, filmmakers, writers, playwrights, actors and composers. Sundance also offers a program that supports new work by both emerging and established Native American writers, directors and producers. The Sundance Institute has supported thousands of artists through artistic development programs and by showcasing the work of filmmakers at the Sundance Film Festival.

Other programs the Institute offers are: the annual Independent Producers Conference, which focuses on the business of making an independent film; the Film Music Program, which connects filmmakers with talented emerging composers; and a play development program called the Theater Laboratory that helps writers turn their scripts into large-scale plays. The institute also offers the Documentary Film Program to support nonfiction filmmakers and has turned out such notable films as "Hoop Dreams," "Smoke Signals" and "Boys Don't Cry."

A STATE AFFAIR

The Utah Film Commission, a division of the Governor's Office of Economic Development (GOED), is charged with helping brand Utah as a great spot for filmmakers to produce movies. The Commission provides a variety of resources to filmmakers, from initial scouting and pre-production to photography and post-production.

The Utah Legislature has helped this effort by passing several bills as incentives for filmmakers to choose to film in the state. In July 2005, Gov. Jon M. Huntsman signed House Bill 17, which provided \$1 million during the 2006 fiscal year to pay back a percentage of the production costs of movies filmed in the state. Because of the bill, films produced here will see a 10 percent return on their money spent in Utah.

Another piece of legislation, Senate Bill 190, allows film, television and video production to take a sales tax exemption at the point of sale on machinery and equipment. And producers who film in the state and occupy a public accommodation for 30 con-



secutive days can take advantage of a transient room tax rebate—up to three percent added to sales tax is refundable.

The crew of “The World’s Fastest Indian,” a film starring Anthony Hopkins, took advantage of some of these savings. Initially the show was going to film in Utah for only seven days, but because of the incentives and the diversity of the landscape—Utah could double for both LA and New Zealand—they decided to stay 37 days instead. The film is the real-life story of Burt Munro, a New Zealand native who builds a motorcycle and sets the land-speed world record at Utah’s Bonneville Salt Flats in the 1970s. Ninety-five percent of the film was filmed in the state.

At one point, Utah was one of the top five states for the number of films produced here, says Aaron Syrett, executive director of the Utah Film Commission. Syrett believes Utah’s new legislation will influence even more producers to keep their eyes on Utah.

Syrett points to the infrastructure in Utah—the talent, crews and loca-

tion—as reasons why producers like to film in the state. “There’s a strong work ethic here; our crews are known around the nation and around the world as hard workers who know their craft,” he says.

The film industry in Utah has proven to be good for the economy and provides many meaningful jobs, from camera operators for a TV series to extras on the set to graphic artists that create animations for a Pixar film. “The industry generates clean jobs. It showcases the state on the screen, and the salaries are good enough to make the employees prospective homebuyers,” says Leigh von der Esch, director of the Utah Office of Tourism. To assist filmmakers, the Film Commission custom builds production packages to fit individual needs for locations, talent, crews and technical expertise. Producers can access options at www.film.utah.gov and create a sample package online.

A healthy climate for filming has a ripple effect on tourism in the state. For instance, when people see

the hoodoos in the movie “Galaxy Quest,” they soon realize the location is Utah’s Goblin Valley and want to visit. Von der Esch was eager to point out the way film increases tourism in the state. “There’s no billboard as big as a movie,” she says.

HALESTORM ENTERTAINMENT

Soon, Utah will boast about another filmmaking incentive. Orem-based Halestorm Entertainment’s Apex Development is building a 42,000-square-foot state-of-the-art sound studio in Orem that the company will rent out to filmmakers. The studio was completed in December 2005. “There are so many films that come through town that don’t have a place to hang their hat,” says Dave Hunter, one of Halestorm’s founders. “We will have a full-blown facility and we will be the only game in town.”

Halestorm Entertainment has carved a unique niche in Utah’s film industry. The company makes movies that play off themes of Utah’s Mormon culture. In fact, Utah County is becoming a film hot spot and has even

“There’s no billboard as big as a movie. The industry generates clean jobs. It showcases the state on the screen, and the salaries are good enough to make the employees prospective homebuyers.”

Leigh von der Esch
director of the Utah Office of Tourism.

been coined “Mollywood,” a play on the term “Molly Mormon” (Molly is often used to represent the archetypal pure Mormon girl). After graduating from the Brigham Young University Film School, Hunter and friend Kurt Hale started Halestorm Entertainment in 2001. They’ve made more than \$10 million off films such as “The Singles Ward” and “The RM” that spoof elements of Mormon culture.

Utah County has derived additional cache from the work of Richard Dutcher (the “God’s Army” films and other incisive dramas), the “Work and the Glory” films, Ryan Little’s multiple-award-winning “Saints and Soldiers,” and the “Napoleon Dynamite” phenomenon created by Jared and Jerusha Hess.

SPY HOP: SUPPORTING YOUNG FILMMAKERS

The entrepreneurial spirit runs strong in Utah among filmmakers, including among young people. Not many 19-year-olds get to watch their creative scribbling morph into a feature film on the big screen. But for Willie Kent and his friends at Spy Hop Productions, their simple script dramatiz-

ing one man’s midlife crisis has been transformed into “The Race to Outrun,” a film that debuted at the Broadway Center Theatre in Salt Lake City on November 2, 2005. Kent is a recent high school grad lucky enough to be accepted into Spy Hop, a community film program for young people in Salt Lake.

“We got to film on location in a train,” says Kent. The young crew members first tried to film while the train was moving, but it was too noisy. Instead, they created a “light gag,” a wooden contraption with slats that the crew ran light through to give viewers the impression of a moving train.

Spy Hop has its hands in all sorts of projects, like partnering with Sundance on the Reel Stories program, a four-week intensive program that helps about a dozen kids learn how to make a documentary. Nearly 100 kids participate in Spy Hop’s after-school programs throughout the year. Ten local youth get to participate in Spy Hop fulltime. They spend the first five months writing and refining their scripts. They then create a portfolio outlining how they will make the film, complete with a script, a sto-

ryboard, crew and production budget. Then their ideas are auctioned off at an event called Pitch-nic (the brainchild of Spy Hop director Rick Wray.) At the Pitch-nic, the students show off their portfolios and try to win capital to make a film. Local film enthusiasts, business people and philanthropists are invited. Last year Spy Hop made \$55,000 to divide between four films.

Jeremy Nielsen, the film and video director of the program, offered his technical know-how as one of Kent’s mentors. Nielsen worked on Movies of the Week, shows such as “Invasion of the Killer Bee Nightmare,” and has made a few of his own films, including “Twice Today” (winner of the North Carolina film festival). He has also taught art and geography at a youth prison.

“Our job is to empower youth; if the movie turns out good, that’s an added bonus,” says Nielson.

With its unparalleled photogenic topography, its mix of veterans young and old and a rising new generation of film makers, Utah is positioned to light up the silver screen for generations to come.



“There’s a strong work ethic here; our crews are known around the nation and around the world as hard workers who know their craft.”

Aaron Syrett
executive director of the Utah Film Commission



SPY HOP